

if one thing had been different

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/39608943) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/39608943>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Marvel Cinematic Universe , Marvel , Iron Man (Movies)
Relationship:	James "Rhodey" Rhodes/Tony Stark
Character:	Tony Stark , James Rhodes , Obadiah Stane , Jarvis (Iron Man movies)
Additional Tags:	Suicide Attempt , Suicidal Thoughts , Tony Stark-centric , Angst , Mutual Pining , Unresolved Sexual Tension , Pre-Iron Man 1 , POV Tony Stark , POV James "Rhodey" Rhodes , James "Rhodey" Rhodes & Tony Stark Friendship , Protective James "Rhodey" Rhodes , Tony Stark Feels , Alcoholic Tony Stark , Implied/Referenced Child Abuse , Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence , Drug Use , Sharing a Bed , Mild Sexual Content , Ambiguous/Open Ending
Language:	English
Series:	Part 14 of 2022 prompt challenge
Stats:	Published: 2022-06-13 Words: 8151

if one thing had been different

by [tonystarktrash](#)

Summary

So, Tony drank more, he had more sex, and five days ago he had snorted some cocaine, and then had snorted more, and more — until he had woken up in the emergency room, his ribs cracked from CPR, his heart beating fast and erratically, and there had been no one there to hold his hand.

2022 prompt challenge 20: homecoming

Notes

please mind the tags

The gun is too heavy, that was what had drawn Tony to it in the first place. He had been avoiding Obadiah Stane, who had been prowling the executive hallway since 8 o'clock that morning. Tony had caught sight of Obadiah's shadow spilling out from the doorway of his office and had

promptly turned around and re-entered the elevator. His tour of Stark Industries had led him to buildings he hadn't stepped foot in since the grand opening of the Los Angeles campus in 1993. He had visited Human Resources, which had prompted alarmed expressions that had given way to relief when he had pawed through the candy jar on the receptionist's desk, made a shitty joke, and fled. He had found peace on the assembly line, watching with narrowed eyes as robotic arms moved smoothly over conveyor belts, plucking rifles and missile casings away seemingly at random. Tony had ambled down an aisle, his hands tucked into the pockets of his trousers, his gaze following the sleek line of handguns as it moved through the manufacturing plant. He had reached out, his fingers splaying, and had picked up the gun. A robotic arm had lunged forward, its clawed appendage hovering over the space where the gun had been — these robots were not like those Tony had built himself, they did not possess any sort of artificial intelligence, but he had sensed confusion in that hovering claw.

With the gun a heavy weight in the pocket of his suit jacket, Tony had returned to the executive hallway, smiling at Obadiah as the other man had advanced down the hallway towards him. Obadiah's hand had landed heavily on Tony's shoulder, his grip had tightened, and he had led Tony wordlessly to his office. Once the doors were shut, and locked for good measure, Obadiah had unleashed such fury on Tony that it had reminded him of Howard Stark. He would have flinched, too, and perhaps a muscle beneath his eye twitched when Obadiah had lifted one fisted hand — but there had been no real fear. Not because Tony had the gun, but because he knew that his Uncle Obie would never hurt him.

"You're killing me, Tony," Obadiah had murmured, the fight leaving him with a long exhalation, his broad shoulders slumping forward as he had bowed his head. "What am I going to do with you, son?"

"It was just a stupid mistake, Obie," Tony had muttered, turning away from the other man, staring out at the windows behind his desk blankly.

"You could have died. You nearly *died*, Tony. And like that? That's how you want to go out? From an overdose? Christ, Tony, if that got out, you might as well be dead, the press would never let it go."

"I'll be more careful," Tony had replied, pressing his forehead against the glass.

"I wish you would just — ease up a bit," Obadiah's hand had pressed between his shoulder blades, the touch weighty and possessive. Tony had given himself to Obadiah's touch, the inherent promise of security, of protection. Obadiah had always looked out for him. "Quit the drugs," Obadiah had continued, his blunt fingertips brushing gently against the nape of Tony's neck.

"Yeah," Tony had said hollowly. "I'll try, Obie."

That had been the end of the argument. Obadiah had accepted his false promise and Tony had sat down at his desk until 5 o'clock, ignoring the mass of emails gathering in his inbox and the continual pages from his temporary PA. He had pulled the gun from his pocket and had set it on top of one of the stacks of paperwork crowding his desk, his expression thoughtful.

It's the weight of the thing. The *weight*. Tony leans forward from where he is seated on his living room couch, his fingertips dragging along the textured grip of the handgun, along the etched logo of Stark Industries along the base of the magazine. Weight. Tony is no stranger to that. There has been a weight on his shoulders since he was old enough to feel it, in his father's stares — slightly hopeful at first, when Howard had decided to tolerate him in an effort to secure his legacy, and then stares of disgust as Tony had aged and become a person that Howard despised. Those stares were heavier, Tony struggled under their weight, his vertebrae cracking, his knees giving out, his

fingers clawing into the dirt as he dragged himself forward to temporary relief — drugs, sex, alcohol. It was like stepping into a deep pool, he could lift anything when he couldn't *feel*.

He had fantasized about his father's death dozens of times during his adolescence — kind deaths, in which Howard simply slumped over his desk and died of a quiet heart attack. Brutal deaths, in which a weapon malfunctioned in Howard's hands, the fractured metal falling away as his hands clutched at his shredded abdomen, intestines bulging between his bloody fingers. Death had come for Howard Stark and it had been worse than Tony could imagine — because it had taken Maria Stark as well. The weight had grown so heavy that Tony couldn't get through more than a couple of days without doing something to ease it, and as time went on, he found that his usual tricks did nothing to lessen the burden.

So, he drank more, he had more sex, and five days ago he had snorted some cocaine, and then had snorted more, and more — until he had woken up in the emergency room, his ribs cracked from CPR, his heart beating fast and erratically, and there had been no one there to hold his hand.

Tony is no stranger to firearms, either. His hands had been crafted to hold them, his fingers are slender and deft, he can disassemble this particular model with his eyes closed. He had designed it. He pulls the handkerchief from the lapel pocket of his suit, the embroidery of his initials rough against his fingertips, and drags the silken material along the barrel of the gun, darkening it with oil.

Never point a gun at something unless you are willing to pull the trigger. One of the lessons his father had taught him during the few failed hunting trips they had taken together as father and son. Tony cried over each deer they had killed — he had never been willing to pull the trigger, but Howard had made him. Tony has killed before — animals, yes, and people, too. Perhaps not directly, but seeing himself being called the Merchant of Death in biting OpEds had nearly broken him, the *weight* of it all. There's no way for him to stop, to change Stark Industries, Obadiah would never allow it, nor the Board of Directors, the shareholders. Tony's hands have always been tied, the cords around his forearms are tightening, cutting into his flesh, and he is being crushed.

Were Rhodey here, Tony would be able to breathe, but Tony doesn't have access to James Rhodes right now. Rhodey would always ease the weight, he would grit his teeth and wrestle it from Tony's back, heaving it onto his own with sweat beading on his brow. Rhodey is in the Middle East, Tony doesn't even know his exact location, he hasn't heard from his best friend in over two months. It is the longest he's gone without hearing Rhodey's voice since he was sixteen years old, when he hadn't known Rhodey at all.

Weight. The weight of Rhodey's body against his as he wrapped his arms around Tony tightly, his fingers digging into Tony's back as he clutched him to him. Every time they reunited, Tony would collapse into these embraces, pressing his face against Rhodey's chest as his knees buckled, and Rhodey would keep him upright. Every time he saw Rhodey could be the last time. He might never smell the warm, rich scent that clung to Rhodey — it reminds Tony of fresh timber, sparks crackling in the wood as it is set alight. Every time could be the last, so Tony can't *tell* him — and that eats him alive. The truth of it has been devouring him steadily for over ten years. Whenever he wakes up with the imagined feeling of Rhodey's skin brushing against his lips, Tony feels weaker than before, his body turning into a dry husk that will not hold for much longer under the bulk spread over his back.

Rhodey is his best friend. Rhodey is the most important person in his life. Tony loves Rhodey. He has always loved him. Rhodey loves him, too, he knows that. But Rhodey loves him as he loves his brother Lawrence, Rhodey looks at him and sees his best friend. That will never change, Tony *knows* that — even if he and Tony were not best friends, Rhodey is straight. At least, Tony is quite

certain that Rhodey is straight. They've never discussed his sexuality, but Tony has only seen Rhodey with women.

Why would Rhodey want you? Why would anyone? Except for money, or for fame — certainly not for happiness. All Tony can offer is this weight, and who wants that?

His dirty handkerchief falls to the floor. Tony tightens his grip on the gun, leaning back against the couch, his feet bracing against the floor. This gun never would have been sold, but not because it didn't work. Tony's eyes close as he drags the muzzle of the gun along his jaw, stubble rasping against the metal, which is freezing cold against his skin. With a quiet hum, he presses the muzzle under his jaw, his thumb finding the safety, which clicks quietly.

"J.A.R.V.I.S.?" Tony's voice is quiet, his index finger caressing the trigger. "What's the rate of survival for a gunshot wound to the head?"

J.A.R.V.I.S. does not reply immediately. As the seconds tick by, Tony wonders if the AI has malfunctioned — he nearly feels guilty, no one will be able to fix J.A.R.V.I.S. with him gone. But there's a sick sense of satisfaction, too, something he had made, something he had *touched*, has fallen apart. He should have expected it to happen sooner.

"Sir, I advise against this," J.A.R.V.I.S. finally says.

"I didn't ask for your opinion, J," Tony's jaw tightens, he shifts the gun forward until the muzzle is digging into the point of his chin. "What is the rate?"

"Over 90% of individuals perish following a gunshot wound to the head. Of those that survive long enough to reach a hospital, over 50% die in the emergency room."

"Hmm," Tony's lips part, he breathes in deeply through his nose as the gun presses into his mouth. It tastes foul, he had done a shitty job cleaning away the oil, his face twists into a grimace as he wrenches the gun from his mouth before the muzzle can do anything more than glance against his hard palate.

"No," Tony mutters, dragging the gun against his pantleg to wipe away his saliva. "Too fucking uncomfortable."

"Sir."

Tony frowns. J.A.R.V.I.S. very rarely speaks unprompted — Tony doesn't like being interrupted.

"May I contact Mr. Stane?"

"Absolutely not, J.A.R.V.I.S. I told you to shut down all communications."

"We have been offline since 5:37 p.m., Sir, as you instructed."

"Keep it that way, J.A.R.V.I.S." Tony lifts the gun from his lap, turning it in his hand until the moonlight glints on the dark metal. He can't imagine the relief he will feel when he pulls the trigger — for a split second, the weight will disappear, and then it will finally be over. "You can contact the authorities once you've —" his voice falters, he has to clear his throat for several seconds before he can speak. "Once you've confirmed that I'm dead."

"Yes, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. says, sounding more robotic than ever before, halting and stiff, little more than the garbled voice the AI had begun as in 1988.

Tony's left hand is clenched into a fist on his lap. He flattens his palm against his thigh, his sweat wicked away by the fabric of his pants, his chest heaving as he inhales until his lungs start to strain. His right hand is steady as it raises the gun, the muzzle pressing hard against his temple, his eyes closing.

"Major Rhodes, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. announces, soft enough that Tony can hear the footsteps in the foyer, the front door thudding loudly against the wall.

"Tony?!" Rhodey is frantic, his voice cracks, his booted feet thump against the marble floor as he jogs through the mansion.

"Rhodey?" Tony says, his mouth dry, the gun slipping down the side of his face, which is slick with sweat. "*Rhodey?*"

"Tony," Rhodey appears in the doorway to the living room, shrouded in darkness, moonlight catching on the metallic threads of the patches that adorn his flight suit.

"Rhodey," Tony's voice is steady, his hand falls to the couch cushion, roughly shoving the gun underneath it as he stumbles onto his feet. "Rhodey, what the — how the hell are you —"

"Tony," Rhodey breathes, crossing the room in four strides, his arms wrapping around Tony and crushing him into his chest. "Christ."

"I don't understand," Tony mumbles, his face pressing against Rhodey's neck, smelling sand, sweat, and smoke.

"I had this awful feeling," Rhodey's voice rumbles in his chest, his hand lifting from Tony's back to rest against the back of his head, cradling it for a moment, long enough to spread his fingers through Tony's damp hair. "I had to — I had to see you." His hands drop to Tony's shoulders, pushing him back at arm's length, his brown eyes dark and appraising as he looks at Tony.

"An awful feeling?" Tony repeats slowly, cocking his head, relishing in the way that Rhodey's fingers dig into his shoulders. He's holding him hard enough that it will leave bruises, Tony will be able to press down on those bruises and remember the feeling of Rhodey holding him like his touch is the only thing keeping Tony from disappearing. "Did Obie call you?"

"What?" Rhodey blinks, his gaze sharpening, his grip loosening on Tony's shoulders. "No, I just — I managed to get twenty four hours leave, Tones, I have to be back to base by 8 a.m."

"But." Tony's lips are numb. Did the muzzle of the gun leave an imprint on his temple? Rhodey is staring at his temple. Rhodey is staring at his chin like there might be a mark there, which is impossible, Tony's goatee would cover any mark that might have formed. "What about your mom?"

Whenever Rhodey has leave, he always sees his mother in Boston — if he has enough time to see Tony, he does, but Tony doesn't begrudge him for seeing his mother. He would do the same, if he could.

"She'll forgive me," Rhodey murmurs, his fingers brushing against Tony's temple gently. He frowns as he draws his hand back, rubbing his thumb against his fingertip. "You've got oil all over your face, Tony."

"I do?" Tony lets out a laugh, false and brittle. "Damn, I wonder how long that's been there. I was in the plant today, keeping up with production. Your CO's will be happy, the new rifles are almost ready to be shipped out and —" he's babbling, his heart is in his throat, and there's a gun

underneath the couch cushion.

“You’re okay?” Rhodey shakes his shoulders gently. “You’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” Tony says. “I — well, there was a bit of trouble a couple of days ago. I was going to tell you about it whenever I heard from you next, but you don’t need to worry, okay? It was just an accident. And I’m fine, I just have a couple of cracked ribs, it hurts to laugh — but I overdosed, alright? I lost count of how many lines — it doesn’t matter, it was stupid. I won’t do it again.”

“Jesus Christ,” Rhodey pulls his hands from Tony and he nearly stumbles forward, his hand stretched out to Rhodey’s back, which is tense under the fabric of his flight suit as he turns quickly away from Tony. “Jesus Christ,” Rhodey repeats, gripping his head tightly. “Why didn’t you send a message? Tony, I would’ve come home. What if you had — and no one had told me?”

“I’m okay,” Tony says again, resting his hand tentatively against Rhodey’s shoulder. “I swear, I am. I learned my lesson, I’ll be more careful. And I’m not dead, okay? Come on, Rhodey, you know me. Sometimes I fuck up.”

“This is worse than fucking up!” Rhodey shouts, Tony flinching when he turns to face him, his hands lifting from his head.

They stare at each other in silence, Rhodey’s face twisted with anger, fear, and grief.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, inching closer to Tony, his hands held open at his sides. “I’m sorry, T. I shouldn’t have shouted. I’m just —” he swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing wildly in his throat. “That fucking terrifies me. Losing — losing you terrifies me.”

“I won’t do it again,” Tony says, hating how sullen he sounds. He was moments away from doing something much worse than accidentally overdosing on cocaine, he had lifted that gun to his head with every intention of pulling the trigger. Had Rhodey stepped through the door ten seconds later, he would have been met with a very different sight.

“Okay,” Rhodey murmurs. “Can I...?”

“Yes,” Tony nods, closing his eyes as Rhodey steps forward and hugs him again, pressing his forehead against Rhodey’s shoulder.

“Jesus,” Rhodey says again.

“You’ve got great intuition,” Tony jokes weakly, snorting when Rhodey shoves him away with a grunt.

“You’re an asshole,” Rhodey says tiredly, dragging a hand across his face.

“Did you fly straight here?”

“Uh huh,” Rhodey knuckles at his forehead. “I stink, I’m starving, and so goddamn tired.”

“Well,” Tony drags a hand along his side, his ribs aching under his palm. “Are you gonna stay here tonight?”

“Do you mind?” Rhodey cocks his head.

“Of course I don’t,” Tony says quickly, his hand pressing harder against his side until it starts to hurt, but the pain doesn’t stop him from speaking. “Can you stay in my room?”

Does Rhodey hesitate? Tony swears that he does. It's not like this is crossing a line, he and Rhodey have shared a bed before. When Tony's parents had died, Rhodey had held him through the night for weeks, it was the only way Tony could sleep. But maybe those times are in the past, maybe at 27 and 29, two men are not supposed to fall asleep in each other's arms unless they are — *which we're not*.

"Sure, Tony," Rhodey says. "Don't know how much sleep I'll get if you're snoring, though."

"I'll hold it in," Tony promises, gesturing towards the kitchen. "There's leftover Chinese, if you want. I've got some peanut butter and jelly if you want to make a sandwich."

"How old are the leftovers?" Rhodey asks, trudging to the kitchen, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Tony is practically shepherding him out of the living room. There will be no need for them to return to the living room, Tony will be able to retrieve the gun once Rhodey has left tomorrow morning, he'll lock it away in the safe and try to forget about it until the next time the weight becomes too much to bear.

"Uh..." Tony scratches at the back of his neck, leaning against the counter and watching Rhodey scavenge for food in his fridge. "Probably a week."

"Fucking radioactive," Rhodey says fondly, tossing the paper containers onto the counter. "I'll settle for PB & J."

"What have you been doing?" Tony is unable to stifle his curiosity.

Rhodey glances over at him as he smears peanut butter onto two pieces of white bread, his expression flickering into discomfort.

"Flying missions, Tony, that's all I can tell you. You know that."

"Top secret," Tony mutters, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I know, you hate it," Rhodey chuckles, returning to the fridge in search of jelly. "I don't know if I'll be able to come back again before my tour is over."

This could be the last time I ever see him.

"Really?"

Rhodey nods, taking a bite out of his sandwich. "I had to beg to get 24 hours," he says thickly. "But it's only a few more months."

"It'd be easier if you could call more," Tony sounds sullen again, he reaches up and starts to undo his tie. Usually when he returned home from work, he shirked every item of clothing except for his briefs and his socks, tossing his discarded clothing into the hamper which he envisioned as an incinerator. Tonight he had returned home and thought of nothing except the gun, and weight, and endings.

"I know," Rhodey says quietly, his half-eaten sandwich set aside for a moment. "Believe me, Tony, I call when I can. I'll try to call more, okay? Don't hold me to anything, but I'll try."

"Okay," Tony nods, winding his tie between his fingers. "You're gonna be starving if that's all you're eating."

"Oh well," Rhodey replies, the sandwich dangling from his mouth as he sweeps the leftover

cartons into the trash can. “It’s enough.”

As they walk to Tony’s bedroom, Rhodey starts to wrestle himself out of his flight suit, the zipper catching on grains of sand. He nearly tumbles into Tony, the suit tangled around his legs, and they both are laughing breathlessly as Tony’s hands brace against Rhodey’s abdomen. The thin fabric of his undershirt slips up, revealing dark skin and taut muscles, and Tony looks away as he steps past Rhodey into the bedroom.

“I’ll just be a second,” Rhodey tells him, kicking out of his boots and flight suit on his way to Tony’s bathroom.

Tony sits on the edge of his bed and holds his head in his hands, listening as Rhodey turns on the shower, the sound of running water soothing. When he thinks that he can undress without his hands shaking, he does, pulling himself free of his suit jacket. He gathers his discarded clothes and gets to his feet, crossing the room to his hamper. On his way back to his bed, he bends down and collects Rhodey’s flight suit. He holds it out in front of him, glancing at the bathroom door furtively, and then presses his face against it, inhaling deeply.

This is sick. You’re fucking pathetic. He takes another shuddering breath, his face burning, and folds the flight suit neatly. He places it gently on his nightstand, his palm pressing flat against the thick fabric, his fingertips dragging along the patch bearing Rhodey’s call sign — *WAR MACHINE*.

Tony turns to look at his bed, his hands on his hips, and wonders if he will embarrass himself tonight. Will he say something to Rhodey on the brink of sleep, admit one of the few secrets he has managed to keep? *No*. He roughly pulls the duvet backward and clambers up onto the bed, punching the stack of pillows behind him until they form a comfortable shape for him to rest against. He raises his right hand, his fingers glancing against his face, frowning at the film of oil clinging to his temple.

“Tony, do you have something I can wear?” Rhodey asks, appearing in the doorway to the bathroom with a fluffy white towel slung around his hips. Tony looks at his face intently, rather than Rhodey’s muscular physique — Rhodey had always been in shape, he was always in trainings with the ROTC program when they were in college, but once he had joined the Air Force, he had taken it to the next level. Tony wants to watch the beads of water trickle their way along the toned muscles of his chest, he wants to chase after the rivulets with his tongue as they follow the lines of his abdominal muscles. He wants to kneel in front of Rhodey, feel the other man’s hands in his hair as he takes Rhodey’s cock into his mouth and — he curls his right hand into a fist against his face, his knuckles digging into his skin, and nods numbly.

“Sure, Rhodey.” He remains seated on the bed. Rhodey cocks an eyebrow and Tony realizes that he’s supposed to be providing Rhodey with clothing, he is not supposed to be boring a hole into Rhodey’s nose because he can’t bring himself to look into Rhodey’s eyes.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, scrambling off the bed, jerking open the drawers to his dresser. He roots around in the topmost drawer for a few moments, his fingers hooking a worn MIT Swimming and Diving t shirt, which he tosses in Rhodey’s general direction. At the back of the drawer, he finds a pair of plaid boxers, ignoring the thrill that races down his spine at the thought of Rhodey wearing his underwear.

“I swear to God you had these things freshman year,” Rhodey says as he shakes out the boxers in front of him, turning them around so he can examine the back. “Yep, unless you cut matching holes into the back of all of your underwear, this is the same pair. God, Tony, you should clean out your wardrobe.”

“They’re comfortable,” Tony says defensively. “Put them on and you’ll understand.”

“Alright, alright,” Rhodey shakes his head, returning to the bathroom, and Tony closes the drawers harder than he needs to.

Maybe he should wear something to bed — something other than the briefs he has on. It’s a step up from what he usually wore to bed, which is nothing, but still, he doesn’t want to make Rhodey uncomfortable. He wraps his hands around the edges of the dresser, gripping tightly until the wood starts to creak, the muscles of his forearm tensing, veins bulging across his skin.

“What are you doing?” Rhodey asks him interestedly, turning off the bathroom light.

“Thinking,” Tony admits, turning away from the dresser, his fingers aching.

“About what?” Rhodey looks very cozy dressed in Tony’s clothes for bed, the neck of the t shirt is frayed and loose, revealing the sharp edges of his collarbone and the sturdy base of his neck. Rhodey is holding a washcloth in his left hand, he walks over to the opposite side of the bed and sits down, patting the mattress with his free hand.

Tony walks slowly over to the bed, wondering what to say — he usually doesn’t fumble for a lie, but he’s not at his best tonight. *I’m thinking about a couple of things, Rhodey. I’m thinking about killing myself. I’m thinking about you and I getting in to bed together. I’m thinking about you holding me. I’m thinking about kissing you. I’m thinking about getting you out of those boxers. I’m thinking about how empty I am. I’m thinking about how good you would make me feel. I need to feel good. I need to feel.*

“I’m trying to remember if I had anything for dinner,” Tony says as he lowers himself down onto the bed, his eyes screwing shut when Rhodey presses the washcloth against his face. His voice is muffled by the damp fabric. “What are you doing?”

“Cleaning your face,” Rhodey says gruffly, scrubbing at Tony’s dirty temple. “This stuff is everywhere, T, what were you doing? Rubbing your face on the damn things?”

A shrill, horrific giggle battles against Tony’s clamped lips, emerging as a strained wheeze that has Rhodey’s movements stalling, the washcloth pressed against Tony’s forehead.

“What is going on with you?” Rhodey asks quietly, the pad of his thumb slipping from where it rests against the washcloth, brushing against the skin of Tony’s forehead briefly before pulling away.

“Nothing,” Tony says quickly, pushing the washcloth from his face, it falls to the bed and he and Rhodey regard it in tense silence.

“Okay,” Rhodey says. “Nothing’s going on with you.”

Tony snatches the washcloth and springs from the bed, his heart pounding as he walks to the bathroom. He shuts the door firmly, but the weight of Rhodey’s gaze remains. With a muttered curse, he tosses the washcloth aside and stubbornly ignores his reflection in the mirror as he brushes his teeth. He drags out the process for as long as possible, until the foam around his mouth is more red than white. Wiping his face with a towel, Tony finds himself scrubbing at his skin until his face feels raw. He chances a glance at himself in the mirror, pleased to see that all remnants of oil have been removed. Turning off the bathroom light, Tony takes a deep breath before reentering the bedroom.

Rhodey has shut off the lights. Tony navigates to the bed by the moonlight, relieved to see that

Rhodey has fallen asleep, his back faces Tony and it shifts with Rhodey's even, deep breaths. Carefully, Tony gets back into bed, lying stiffly on his back with his hands clasped tightly over his abdomen.

"Thought maybe you'd gone fishing," Rhodey's voice is a sleepy, deep rumble that has Tony gritting his teeth, a blush burning its way up his neck — he wants *this*. He wants to get in to bed with Rhodey every night and listen to his voice change the sleepier he gets.

"Nope," Tony mutters. "I could've fallen in, though. You should have checked."

The mattress shifts as Rhodey rolls slowly onto his side to face Tony, his eyes blinking open slowly — but they are clear and alert, there's not a hint of drowsiness in his eyes. Tony looks away quickly, staring up at the ceiling, feeling Rhodey's gaze travel over his face and then across his bare chest.

"Jesus, Tony," Rhodey's fingers hover over Tony's sternum, the tan skin there is darkened with bruises, some at the outer edges have a green tinge, but the vast majority are a dark, deep purple.

"From the CPR," Tony says quickly. "It's nothing."

"When did this happen?" Rhodey's fingers lower, until his fingertips press gently against the bruises. The sensation would barely register in Tony's mind if it were anyone else, if he didn't want Rhodey to touch him so *goddamn badly*. "Tony, you should be in the hospital — they can't have let you out after you almost—"

"It was five days ago, and they didn't discharge me," Tony interjects, bracing himself for Rhodey's anger. "I signed out AMA."

Rhodey's hand pulls away, his expression darkening, his disappointment settling on the center of Tony's chest like a boulder.

"Why would you do that?" Rhodey's voice is so soft as he asks the question, Tony doesn't sense pity in his tone, but there's something else there — something desperate, something pained. "Why?"

Tony shrugs, his lips twisting into a grimace at the jolt of pain from his cracked ribs, his right hand resting over his side as he speaks.

"What good was it going to do, Rhodey? I lived."

"This time," Rhodey rolls onto his back, his jaw tightening as he stares up at the ceiling.

"I won't do it again," Tony promises, sitting up and reaching out to touch Rhodey's forearm tentatively. "Come on, Rhodey, don't ice me out."

"I'm not icing you out," Rhodey's eyes find Tony's. "I'm just — Tony." Rhodey's voice softens. "You're breaking my heart. You really are."

For a split second, Tony considers returning to the living room once Rhodey has fallen asleep, pressing the gun to his temple, and pulling the trigger. It's what he deserves, for making Rhodey feel this way. But then, how would Rhodey feel when he woke up in the morning, walked into the living room, and found Tony's body on the floor? If his heart wasn't broken now, it sure as hell would be then. Tony's fingers curl against Rhodey's forearm, feeling muscle and bone move under his touch — such strength. Tony could never be as strong as Rhodey. Rhodey, who carried his own weight as well as Tony's. Admitting his feelings to Rhodey would only increase that weight,

and what if it was too much for Rhodey? What if it broke him?

“I’m sorry,” Tony stares down at where his fingers are wrapped around Rhodey’s arm. “I’m sorry, Rhodey.”

“I know,” Rhodey replies quietly, his hand lifting from the mattress to flatten against Tony’s shoulder. Tony sighs as Rhodey guides him down until he’s lying half on top of him, his head resting underneath Rhodey’s chin, his body shaping itself against Rhodey’s.

I’m sure best friends do this all the time. Tony nearly snorts at the thought, pressing his face against Rhodey’s chest, breathing in the faded scent of his own cologne, and under that, Rhodey.

“Try to get some sleep,” Rhodey suggests, his arm wrapping loosely around Tony, his hand rubbing against his back.

“Okay,” Tony mumbles. “You’re mad at me, though.”

“I’m not mad, Tony. I’m not.” Rhodey’s chest moves as he sighs, his heart beating steadily against Tony’s ear, his body tensing as Tony slings a leg across his hips. “I’ll overheat if you do that,” he complains, but he doesn’t push Tony’s leg away.

“You promise you’re not mad?”

“I promise, Tony. You’re my best friend. You mean the world to me. That’s all. It’s just — it’s hard for me, to watch you do these things to yourself, and for you to not realize...”

Tony waits, his breath caught in his chest, for Rhodey to finish his sentence. He feels Rhodey’s hand against his back, a warm, comforting pressure against his tense muscles.

“Good night, Tony,” Rhodey says, his voice slightly strangled.

He’s crying. Or about to. Tony wants to lift his head and kiss the tears from Rhodey’s cheeks, if he lets them fall. Instead, he closes his eyes and kisses Rhodey’s chest gently — a brush of his lips, Rhodey wouldn’t feel it through his shirt and wouldn’t think twice about Tony moving his head into a more comfortable position for sleep.

“Night, Rhodey. Thanks for checking on me.”

“Of course, Tones.” Rhodey pulls the duvet up, until they are both nestled beneath the covers, Tony’s breath puffing hotly against his chest. “Just — stop doing stupid shit. Please.”

Tony laughs, giving Rhodey’s side a fleeting caress, and then yawns. He really is tired. He imagines he’s crashing from the adrenaline rush of almost killing himself — or maybe it’s because Rhodey is here, taking some of Tony’s burden for himself so that he can sleep.

“I love you, Rhodey,” Tony mumbles.

“I love you too, Tony,” Rhodey replies after a pause. “Get some sleep.”

Tony has been asleep for at least twenty minutes. He had faked it for a while, his breathing shallow, his eyes moving rapidly beneath his eyelids, his fingers tapping out the occasional beat

against Rhodey's shirt. Rhodey had held him anyways, his gaze fixed on the window, at the endless stretch of ocean beyond — because he couldn't stare at Tony, Tony might open his eyes and look at him.

But Tony is asleep now, his snores are muffled against Rhodey's chest, but it still sounds like someone has fiddled with the antenna until the television screen only shows a roar of static. When Rhodey had first lived with Tony, he had spent sleepless nights listening to Tony snoring, frustrated tears forming in his eyes as dawn came — but then, weeks went by, and earplugs managed to reduce the brunt of the noise. Now, Rhodey struggles to sleep in silence, and he always wakes well rested whenever he sleeps in the same room as Tony. Or in the same bed.

Tony takes a snuffling breath, Rhodey's hand lifts, his teeth grinding together, certain that he's been caught. Ever since he was certain Tony was asleep, he has been allowing himself to gently caress Tony's face — to trace the curve of his ear with a fingertip, to follow his eyebrow and the ridge of bone beneath, to smooth along the arch of his cheekbone, to follow the sharp line of his jaw, not pulling away even as the coarse hairs of his goatee scraped against Rhodey's fingertip. The right side of Tony's face is fully exposed to Rhodey, the left side is burrowed against Rhodey's chest. Tony shudders in his sleep, his forehead dragging against the fabric of Rhodey's borrowed t-shirt, and then he relaxes. Rhodey's fingers drop slowly to Tony's scalp, smoothing curls of brown hair back from his forehead and his ear, teasing the strands between his fingers.

When he had first met Tony, the two years separating them had seemed insurmountable. Tony was like a little brother to him — literally, he was just as annoying as Lawrence Rhodes, but significantly more of a smart-ass. Rhodey would roll his eyes when he introduced Tony to people, grinning at Tony's outraged expression when Rhodey referred to him as "the kid". As the years went by, the difference in years started to shrink as Tony grew a couple of inches, ditched the glasses, and grew his signature goatee. At some point, Tony's rounded cheeks had hollowed, his jaw had sharpened, and he had put on muscle. And Rhodey had noticed that he had put on muscle.

If Rhodey is honest with himself, he had noticed his changing emotions regarding Tony the summer after their junior year at MIT. Tony was just getting out of a relationship that Rhodey knew had been abusive — Tony would laugh off the bruises as the result of a night of passion, but he would cringe whenever someone shouted unexpectedly. Whenever he returned to the apartment visibly sore, cradling his swollen jaw or his aching side, he would look at Rhodey with hazy eyes and mutter something about being clumsy, brushing off Rhodey's offers of first-aid, or at least an ice pack. When Tony and Patrick had broken up, Rhodey had wanted to throw a goddamn party, until Tony staggered into the apartment in tears, his breathing ragged, his voice hoarse, insisting that if anyone was going to love him, it would always hurt. Rhodey had nearly blurted it out then, kneeling on the floor in front of Tony, his hands on his shoulders. *But I love you. And I would never hurt you.* And then Tony's parents had died that Christmas, they had graduated in May, Tony had moved to California almost immediately and Rhodey had joined the Air Force.

And those feelings Rhodey associated with Tony? The desire and jealousy that coiled tight in the pit of his stomach whenever Tony would set his sights on someone at whatever club or bar he had managed to drag Rhodey out to that night? Rhodey shoved those thoughts to the back of his mind, as he always had. If he allows himself to examine those thoughts, he spirals into a crisis about his sexuality — and Rhodey doesn't experience crises. His life is order, and balance, and routine. Tony is chaos, Tony is destruction, Tony is...

Tony is in trouble. Rhodey pulls his hand from Tony's head, pressing it against his eyes until his vision starts to spot. He would rather tumble into a crisis about his sexuality than consider what he had seen this evening as he had charged into Tony's living room. Tony hadn't realized that he was bathed in moonlight, or he had been in shock at seeing Rhodey — regardless, he hadn't been fast

enough, and Rhodey had immediately noticed the gun as it dragged along the length of Tony's face and was promptly shoved in between couch cushions. He will not be able to sleep if he doesn't go and check. He will not be able to sleep anyways.

Wouldn't you rather stay here? Isn't it better not knowing? What if he wakes up and finds you holding the gun? Are you ready for a fight? Will it ruin your friendship? Is holding him like this ruining your friendship anyways?

Tony mumbles in his sleep, a grumble of complaint as Rhodey carefully untangles himself from his embrace. He lets out a whimper as his head lands on the pillow, his hand reaching out blindly for Rhodey, his fingers dragging along the warm sheets where Rhodey had just been lying.

Standing beside the bed, looking down at Tony's sleeping form, Rhodey feels his heart splintering in his chest. He should stay here. Ignorance is bliss, and if he finds that gun, if he holds it in his hands, it will be real. What is he supposed to do if it's real?

Walking on numb legs to the living room, Rhodey is dimly aware that he's sweating. Subconsciously, he reaches up and swipes at his forehead with the back of his hand, but sweat beads up again almost immediately. His shirt sticks to him by the time he reaches the couch, which now seems malevolent, a long mass of white leather with sharp angles and glinting metal legs. His hand slips between the cushions where Tony had been sitting, his fingers drag against cold metal, and Rhodey groans. He pulls the handgun free, it burns in his palm, branding him. Rhodey's eyes bulge, his fingers slacken, and the gun tumbles to the floor.

"Fuck," Rhodey hisses, his voice shaking, and stumbles back against the coffee table as the gun lands between his feet. He picks it up again, his fingers trembling, and flicks the safety on. Chest heaving, he cups the gun in his hands, oil slick against his fingers.

He shifts the gun until he is grasping the grip in his right hand, the fingers of his left hand probing the base of the magazine until he feels the logo for Stark Industries, and his throat burns as stomach acid rises. He gags, turning his head, and tenses his shoulders in anticipation of vomiting. It's caught at the back of his throat, choking him, and Rhodey wants to scream. He gasps for breath, shouldering open the door to the pool deck, the pavers cool under his feet as he presses forward until he's at the very edge of the balcony, the glass wall there pressing hard against his abdomen.

Rhodey pulls the magazine from the handgun and throws it with all of his strength over the balcony. Moonlight dances on the bullets that tumble free of the magazine, turning end-over-end in the air, suspended for a matter of seconds before they fall to the ocean below. Without thinking, Rhodey presses himself harder against the balcony and heaves the gun at the cliff-edge below, hearing it splinter and crack against the rock. Gripping at the balcony with sweaty hands, Rhodey hangs his head and forces himself to breathe.

It's futile. Tony creates weapons for a living. Tomorrow, once Rhodey leaves, he could drive to Stark Industries and get another gun. This time, he might not even go home. He might get behind the wheel of his latest Audi where it is parked in Stark Industries' parking garage, press the gun against his temple, and pull the trigger. But he won't use the gun he had brought home today. Rhodey has at least protected him from that.

But Rhodey hadn't protected him last week when he had overdosed. Rhodey hadn't even *known* Tony had overdosed, there had been no terrible feeling — he had probably been so busy that he hadn't thought of Tony at all. A gun, a syringe full of heroin, a bottle of whiskey and a fast car. At any given time, Tony could pick one and end his life.

"What am I supposed to do?" Rhodey asks anyone who might be listening — but no one is

listening, no one except himself. He could call 911. Tony would never, ever forgive him if Rhodey had him involuntarily committed. Could Rhodey live with that? *He won't be able to forgive you if he's dead, either. And then you'll wish you'd done it. Done anything.*

Is it always going to feel this way? Is loving Tony Stark always going to hurt? If Rhodey went into the bedroom and woke Tony, shaking his shoulders urgently, and told him that he loved him with Tony gazing up at him with a sleepy expression, would that change anything? Would being with Rhodey stop Tony from doing *this*? Or would this be the inevitable conclusion? Would it happen a year from now, fifty years from now? Loving Tony isn't enough to save him from himself.

Rhodey passes a hand over his face, wiping tears from his cheeks, his breathing finally slowing. There is something he can do. It is something that Tony has been joking about for years, but Rhodey has always sensed a thread of sincerity and hope in his voice — *be my weapons liason, Rhodey, I'll give you 20% for every deal. Under the table, of course, you couldn't rock an orange jumpsuit, sugar plum.* Rhodey loves flying. He loves the absolute focus it requires, the way his hands seem to meld with the controls, until he's not just piloting a jet, but truly *flying*. If he became the military liason for Stark Industries, he'd be going down an administrative path that would be difficult to break free from, until flying would be nothing but a faded dream. But he would be home, practically for good. He would see Tony every day if he wanted to, he would know that he was alright, he would be able to address feelings like the one that had gripped him so urgently 14 hours ago.

He had been flying, and suddenly, he had been James Rhodes again. James Rhodes, the best friend of Tony Stark, and Tony was in trouble, Rhodey felt it in his gut. Something was terribly wrong, and if Rhodey didn't get to him as fast as possible, it would be even worse. When Rhodey had finally thought to call Tony, less than an hour out from California, J.A.R.V.I.S. had politely informed him that Tony had turned off all lines of communication and would take no messages. At that point, Rhodey had thought he was too late.

If this tour is his last, if California becomes his home, he will never be *too late*.

Rhodey stands up straight, his shoulders lowering as he exhales deeply, stray tears drying on his cheeks. He'll do it. And in the meantime, he'll encourage Tony to finally get himself a permanent personal assistant, so that there will be another set of eyes on Tony while Rhodey is finishing his tour. He will insist that Tony finally get a bodyguard, too, for the same reason — as well as the fact that Tony has been heckled and harassed several times over the years, with those interactions occasionally becoming physical.

He steps back into the mansion, shivering, air conditioning chilling the sweat that has slowly started to evaporate from his skin. Rhodey looks down at his hands, covered in a thin sheen of oil. He washes them in the kitchen sink, scrubbing until his palms are smarting, and then he returns to the bedroom with damp hands and the beginnings of a migraine.

"Rhodey?" Tony asks sleepily, rolling onto his back as Rhodey pads over to the bed. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, Tony," Rhodey murmurs. "Just needed to pee."

"Prostate," Tony says wisely. "Probably should get that checked, old man."

"Probably," Rhodey agrees, getting back into bed, his body relaxing as Tony immediately cuddles close to him.

"You're wet," Tony mumbles, lifting his head from Rhodey's chest to frown at him, his eyes half-hooded.

“Splash back.”

“Ew,” Tony chuckles, slumping against Rhodey once more, his body a comforting weight. “That’s nasty.”

“Uh huh,” Rhodey closes his eyes, his fingers carding through Tony’s hair, his eyes closing tighter when Tony’s leg slings over his hips once again.

“I really do love you, you know,” Tony mumbles.

Rhodey swallows. This is his moment. He could change everything with a few words added to his response. *But he doesn’t mean it the way you mean it. He loves you because you’re his best friend. So be his best friend. Don’t ruin this.*

“I love you, too, Tony. You’re my best friend.”

Tony exhales softly, the sound almost plaintive, and then he slips easily back into sleep.

Rhodey holds him in his arms and tells himself that everything will be better in the morning — he will make sure that Tony is okay, he will make sure that someone is looking out for him, and then he will return to loving Tony from afar. It will hurt, but loving Tony will always hurt. At least loving him this way will ensure one thing. This love will hurt, but it won’t hurt Tony, because he’ll never know about it.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!